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MACINTYRE AND THE LIMITS OF KIERKEGAARDIAN RATIONALITY

Bruce W. Ballard

Recently in this journal Marilyn Gaye Piety argued both that the critique of Kierkegaardian choice Alasdair MacIntyre offers in *After Virtue* misconstrues Kierkegaard and that a reformulated version of Kierkegaardian choice offers an important gain for philosophy. I argue that Piety has underestimated the power of the MacIntyrean critique of Kierkegaard, that consequently an adequate account of rational choice remains unavailable from that quarter, and that at crucial points MacIntyre's own socially teleological approach to choice offers a superior account.

In a recent article in this journal,¹ Marilyn Gaye Piety argues that in *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre has misunderstood the nature of Kierkegaard's case for a movement from an aesthetic to an ethical form of life and hence mislabeled Kierkegaard as an irrationalist.² Piety goes on to outline a Kierkegaardian model of impassioned rational choice in order to avoid the current false dichotomy between choiceless rational evolution and plainly irrational choice between theoretical frameworks. She further develops and illustrates the model using Kierkegaard's transition from the ethical to the religious stage of existence. I will argue that Piety has underestimated the force of the MacIntyrean critique of Kierkegaardian choice and consequently overestimated the possibility for a coherent Kierkegaardian rationality. These points are amplified by considering Kierkegaardian rationality against comparatively stronger aspects of the account of rational choice MacIntyre proposes.

There is certainly enough *prima facie* evidence in Kierkegaard's own description of choice, particularly in *Either/Or*,³ to warrant the claim that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist. On the other hand, *Either/Or* is full of *arguments* against the aesthetic form and in favor of the ethical. How can this be? Following Polanyi, Piety's answer for Kierkegaard generally is that tension within one's own view cannot be overcome until and unless the situation appears to violate a personal judgment of what is probable.⁴ Passion makes this movement possible. In fact, the more passionate one is, the less inconsistency is necessary for abandoning the view in question.⁵

Both Piety and Kierkegaard admit that there is such a thing as too much passion or 'subjective madness.'⁶ The problem is that the proper degree of



passion cannot be specified.⁷ But if it is only an unspecifiably 'high' degree (high relative to what socially constituted norm?) of personal passion which determines when a view has crossed the line into unacceptable improbability, what makes the choice rational? Here, I take it, MacIntyre's emphasis on rational teleology has some force.⁸ If my will is to be rationally guided I need a theoretical grasp of my ultimate end. Without this grasp, or with an end about which I have become confused and doubtful, how shall I deliberate about what is best for me to do? If I have undisciplined passions, perhaps not having subordinated myself to the requirements of the practices⁹ which make up a recognizable tradition of enquiry, won't my judgment be idiosyncratic?

One could argue, as Kierkegaard does, that passions have their own dialectics.¹⁰ Yet for Piety, even if actual subjective experience can provide criteria for choosing between frameworks for interpreting existence, it will not necessarily incline one toward a particular interpretation of existence.¹¹ But if passionate subjectivity cannot even supply determinate negation in its rejection of a life view, it has lost what remained of the Hegelian rationality Kierkegaard inherits.

But Kierkegaard does retain a form of Hegelian dialectical rationality. Though he tries to make the movement between stages dependent upon passionate choice, the whole scheme of the development of the concept of the aesthetic in *Either/Or* is obviously Hegelian. Kierkegaard is clearly trying to exhibit contradiction internal to the aesthetic point of view and to show how the ethical view resolves such contradiction while at the same time preserving the best insights of the original position. MacIntyre identified the tension between the two approaches to choice here more explicitly before the critique in *After Virtue*: "The difficulty is that Kierkegaard wished *both* to maintain that there could be no objective criterion for the decision between the two alternatives, *and* to show that the ethical was superior to the aesthetic."¹² By trying to show that the aesthetic view fails by its own criteria, Kierkegaard offers an objective refutation which, due to the common debt to Hegel, meets many of the requirements of MacIntyrean rationality.¹³ By leaving the decision to passionate choice, Kierkegaard seems to disregard such demonstration. Kierkegaard's *both/and* here is really an *either/or*.

What are we to make of this apparently blank inconsistency? MacIntyre's typical strategy at such a juncture is to examine relevant historical antecedents together with the sociology implicit in the moral view in question. Such a move is not possible for Kierkegaard who, while a master of psychological observation and description, has almost no sociology and only individual history. Kierkegaard is heir to a number of traditions of varying kinds and degrees of incompatibility. MacIntyre identifies a number of the key sources here: the centrality of passion in the doctrine of choice comes from romanticism, the concept of the ethical from Kant, the concept of reason from Pascal

and the larger protestant tradition, some of the content of his ethics from Lutheranism, and the dialectic from Hegel.¹⁴ In addition to these debts, Kierkegaard also explicitly makes use of Hegel's concept of alienation against the aesthete, who will be unhappy to the degree to which he has his essence outside himself.¹⁵

We have seen that Hegelian dialectic and the romanticism of feeling do not combine for a coherent theory of choice. But there is also incoherence in making the choice for the ethical a purely subjective and passionate one while the concept of ethics is abstract and universal. In Kant the ethical imperative is abstract and universal because its source is reason, from which it also derives its authority. Our choice for the ethical is based on the subjective feeling of respect, but this feeling is self-wrought by reason. Any empirically interested passion is unfree and at best morally irrelevant. Kant's examples of morally esteemable acts in the *Foundations* are notorious for their lack of passion: the best identified moral act is that in which there is no passion. As MacIntyre notes, Kierkegaard's ethical stage has no authority but the passion of the individual choosing it.¹⁶ Indeed, Kierkegaard's spokesman for the ethical, Judge William of *Either/Or*, claims only the authority of experience.¹⁷

That and how further incompatibilities could be developed is probably evident from the list of sources given above. A more central issue for the question concerning rationally choosing the ethical is the content of Kierkegaard's ethical. As MacIntyre points out, it is a conservative and traditional ethics, dealing with promise-keeping, truth-telling, and benevolence "understood in a very simple way."¹⁸ But Kierkegaard's development of the ethical view is 'traditional' in a number of other ways which MacIntyre does not examine but are nevertheless both available to his approach and important for what they say against the rationality of passionate choice for the ethical.

As noted earlier, Kierkegaard's analysis of experience is psychological; it is centered on the subjective experience of the individual as individual. The danger of such exclusive attention is manifest: a partial and distorted view of reality for the lack of attention to the larger social and historical dimensions of the human situation. This is nowhere clearer than in Kierkegaard's ethical picture.

In a word, Kierkegaard's paradigm of the ethical stage is the life of a self-satisfied bourgeois. Following Hegel rather than Kant, Kierkegaard takes ethical life to include the satisfaction of work and domestic life. Unlike Hegel and the Aristotelian tradition he in part represents, Kierkegaard's ethical is virtually apolitical. On one hand, Kierkegaard acknowledges that Aristotle has an advantage over Kant in connecting justice to the social sense and friendship.¹⁹ On the other hand, since this led Aristotle to make the state the highest concept, Kierkegaard rejects the Aristotelian approach.²⁰ But without something like the synthesis Aquinas effects between Aristotelian notions of social membership and purpose together with the ultimate end of Christianity,

Kierkegaard ends up with an abortive teleology.²¹ When he claims that personality is its own teleology, it is not a socially and historically situated personality to which he refers. This is very clear in his remarks about marriage, work, and in general in the lack of any clear notion or concern for justice *in the ethical stage of life*!

Kierkegaard reproaches the aesthete for his heartless insistence to the non-rich that without a lot of money one cannot enjoy life.²² This is consistent with Kierkegaard's application of the Hegelian concept of alienation to the aesthete: he has his essential conditions of existence, here money, outside himself. Kierkegaard anticipates the argument that without certain external conditions, for example a living wage, even marriage becomes an impossible situation for the non-rich. His reply together with his larger ethic of work cannot help but remind that Kierkegaard was unmarried and, much more, that he did not have to support himself by working.

Kierkegaard's reply is that if someone tries, he (Kierkegaard means the male) will be able to find work at a living wage sufficient for his family's need, regardless of market or employment conditions. Kierkegaard concurs with Luther that it was never heard that a Christian man should die of hunger.²³ Such a contextless appeal to providence suggests that the ethical stage cannot be justified apart from Christian theology and that with the ellipsis in Kierkegaard's analysis of the social conditions of work he cannot justify his work ethic. He later adds what he takes to be empirical support for his doctrine of work, but reminds that strictly speaking empirical support is irrelevant when it comes to ethics.²⁴

More generally, to see work as ethically meaningful, Kierkegaard would have us see every job as a calling.²⁵ But this calling retains the vagueness even now associated with the concept since it is unrelated to the social structure of work. Kierkegaard acknowledges that people want their work to be meaningful in the sense that they accomplish something socially necessary or useful. But since determining the extent of one's own contribution to society in one's work is so impracticable, accomplishment "is identical with doing one's job."²⁶ For Kierkegaard, to reckon the meaning of an individual work life in this way is in keeping with and reflects the rational order of things.²⁷

This amounts to treating the particular socio-economic order of 19th century Denmark as timelessly natural. With his ateleological and abstract universal-human duty to work, Kierkegaard ends up making a virtue of alienated labor. Again his lack of reflection on social structures cuts him off from either the modern concept of alienated labor or a just wage, just price formulation such as Aquinas develops out of his systematically Christian integration of Aristotle's analysis of the social. Again this cannot come as a surprise since unlike Aquinas, with his concept of a justice which is in part graspable by natural reason, Kierkegaard simply does not consider a system of what is due between social members.

How is all of this relevant to the rationality of the choice for the ethical? The point is that even if the Hegelian arguments Kierkegaard uses to reject aestheticism were successful, such a success does not leave the ethical conception or content Kierkegaard outlines in *Either/Or* as the clear rational alternative. The antidote to aestheticism Kierkegaard offers, namely hard work regardless of pay, a vaguely church-going religion and the domestic idyll (idol?), exerted and continues to exert some attractive force. But with the decline of Christianity as a social ethos in the West, the concept of marital duty naturally declines. With a greater consciousness of the social structure of work has come wider pain at its injustice in both the developed and so-called developing worlds.

That Kierkegaard himself rejects the concept of religion alluded to in *Either/Or* for the more intense and paradoxical concept most apparent in *Fear and Trembling* suggests that he also recognized the fragility of his ethical stage together with its unsystematic connection to religion. That the final stage of religious existence is and should be seen as completely without social context, even without a church body, is perfectly in keeping with its absolute unintelligibility to ethical consciousness as natural reason grasping natural justice. But let us consider the rationality of the choice for paradoxical Christianity over the standpoint of universal ethics.

Piety wants to show that this move is rational and that it could be defended against MacIntyre's criticisms of the irrationality of the movement from aestheticism to ethical existence. Impassioned rationality rightly chooses Christianity out of its consciousness of sin and the ultimate passionate intensity this consciousness engenders in the individual considering whether he or she may be blessed or damned.²⁸ But this revised form of Pascal's wager suffers the same drawbacks of that construction. In fact, MacIntyre addresses the rationality of Kierkegaard's choice for the religious stage quite specifically before *After Virtue*, and again in the pages of this journal.²⁹ The problem of choice both Kierkegaard and Pascal share is why Christianity must be adopted over some other religion such as Islam.³⁰ MacIntyre also points out here that just as any super-individual authority is lacking in the ethical stage, so is the notion of the objective truth of Christianity lost at the religious stage.³¹

It could be added here that the picture of religious life drawn at the paradoxical religious stage importantly varies from the very congregational structure of New Testament Christianity and completely neglects the challenges and opportunities which came later with the expression of Christianity in wider social and political culture. Especially in *Fear and Trembling* this life sounds like total isolation in constant inward suffering and trial.

Kierkegaard emphasizes that humanly speaking the choice for the paradoxical religious stage is absurd. No one can tell the knight of faith whether he or she is in a trial of faith or a temptation to madness. Consequently there can be no help between people of faith and no essential need of a body of

believers or church. With Kierkegaard's emphasis on the humanly irrational nature of both the choice for this kind of existence and its continuance together with Piety's admission that Kierkegaardian passionate choice need not lead in a particular direction, what is left of rationality?

On the other hand, consider the socially teleological conception of rational choice for Christianity MacIntyre provides in "Which God ought we to obey and why?" On this account, Kierkegaard's religious stage and its absurd choice reflect the Blakean concept of God as Nobodaddy, whose command makes right (however teleologically suspended) apart from and even against any human conception of right.³² While the argument is directed primarily toward Barth and Ramm, the description of what it would mean for Abraham to express faith from an integrated reason and feeling³³ stands in clear contrast to Kierkegaard's depiction.

By outlining an historical progression in which the concepts of justice, goodness and divinity are mutually implicated, MacIntyre preserves the integrity of natural reason grasping natural justice through actual social and historical particularity and relativity. At the same time, natural reason and its grasp of natural justice are understood as the work of God so that human judgment is corrected and supplemented (by revelation) but not destroyed.³⁴ Without simply repeating MacIntyre's argument, it may suffice to point out that this project allows for genuinely human rational choice both for and in religious life in a way which Kierkegaard's conception rules out in principle. Although with Kierkegaard we are often movingly directed toward loving God with our whole heart and strength, we are not so directed in loving Him with our mind.

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NOTES

1. Marilyn Gaye Piety, "Kierkegaard on Rationality," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 1993), pp. 365-379.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

3. Cf. especially Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Vol. II, translated by Walter Lowrie with revisions by Howard A. Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 161-219.

4. Piety, p. 368.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

7. Piety's example of the great passion with which little children reject situations or interpretations of situations unfavorable to them where the slightest inconsistency may be found (Piety, p. 378, footnote 23) is full of ambiguity. Is this degree of passion over

inconsistency which tells against us 'reasonable' for an adult? Or don't we say that what is understandable in a four year old is childish for an adult.

8. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 190.

9. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), chapter 14.

10. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 159.

11. *Piety*, p. 374.

12. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Kierkegaard," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 338.

13. Cf. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

14. Cf. "Kierkegaard," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, p. 338 and *After Virtue*, chapter 4.

15. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, p. 222. There is some irony in this use since the alienation of unhappy consciousness Hegel describes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was meant for a form of Christianity in some ways quite similar to that which Kierkegaard himself proposes, particularly in *Fear and Trembling*. Even though Kierkegaard addresses this implicit challenge in *Either/Or*, even the ethical life Kierkegaard describes there falls prey to criticisms Hegel makes against Kantianism, especially its lack of the social.

16. *After Virtue*, p. 41.

17. *Either/Or*, Vol. II, p. 328.

18. *After Virtue*, p. 41.

19. *Either/Or*, Vol. II, p. 327.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 327.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 284ff.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

28. *Piety*, pp. 372-73.

29. "Which God ought We to Obey and Why?," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 1986), pp. 359-71.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

31. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, p. 339.

32. "Which God Ought We to Obey and Why?," p. 360.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 370.